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ABSTRACT

In the continuing search for skilled workers, employers are increasingly looking to community colleges as the primary training providers for welfare recipients, unemployed workers, and those seeking to increase skills and improve careers. Central Piedmont Community College (CPCC) (North Carolina) provides individuals with the skills and education they need to become self-sufficient and to respond to employer demand for skilled workers. Two programs were developed for cohorts based on job readiness skills: Pathways to Employment, originally designed for welfare recipients, and JumpStart, designed to provide skilled workers in demand in the area. In the fall of 1996, the North Carolina Department of Human Resources and the North Carolina Community College System partnered and developed a training model (Pathways to Employment) to meet the needs of Work First and welfare reform. This is a flexible, 12-16 week training program that combines classes that teach basic academic and job readiness skills and provides training for jobs where skilled workers are in high demand. Project JumpStart was initiated in 2000 as the result of a demand for skilled workers in the trades areas, as well as a method for increasing the number of students in the low-enrollment programs at the college. Pathways to Employment and JumpStart are both proving to be successful job training programs. (Author/NB)

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SHORTCUTS TO LONG-TERM CAREER PATHS

In the continuing search for skilled workers, employers are increasingly looking to the community colleges as the primary training providers for Welfare recipients, unemployed workers, and those seeking to increase skills and careers. Central Piedmont Community College has been in a position to provide individuals with the skills and education they need to become self-sufficient and to respond to employer demand for skilled workers. We have accomplished this through innovative short-term career and skills development programs. Two programs were developed for co-horts based on job readiness skills: Pathways To Employment , originally designed for welfare recipients and JumpStart, designed to provide skilled workers in demand in our area.

Pathways to Employment

Central Piedmont Community College's vision is to become the national leader in workforce development. The Community Development area brings education and training to the workplace in innovative ways. The College used the North Carolina Community College System's model, Pathways to Employment, to create a unique program to train Work First participants (North Carolina's Welfare recipients) for the Charlotte area. CPCC, working in cooperation with the Mecklenburg County Department of Social Services, has developed and successfully implemented a flexible, short-term, Pathways to Employment training program that provides academic, social, and job-specific instruction designed to help students enter the workforce as skilled employees within 12 to 14 weeks.

In the fall of 1996, the North Carolina Department of Human Resources and the North Carolina Community College System came together to develop a training model to meet the needs of Work First and welfare reform. The model was called Pathways to

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Employment and was an integrated, flexible comprehensive program that incorporated basic skills training, pre-employment training and specific job skills training. Funding was provided by the Community College System to ten colleges to implement the model and to evaluate its effectiveness.

Originally designed for Mecklenburg County's Department of Social Services AFDC recipients, the program has attracted a variety of participants including recent dislocated workers. The short-term training combined with the availability of jobs and the specific career ladders developed for each program has provided students with hope for a better future, a job skill, and a job with a career opportunity.

Pathways faculty and staff developed partnerships with local employers to assist in the development of curricula for each training program. Employers' needs were identified and a training program was designed to train Work First clients to meet the need for skilled workers. Strong partnerships with Carolinas Healthcare System, Presbyterian Hospital, and Med-Dent Solutions give the program credibility. These partners provide valuable opportunities for field trips, clinical experiences, job shadowing and guest speakers. Partnerships also exist between CPCC's Pathways program and local agencies. These agencies include: the Department of Social Services, United Way of Central Carolinas, Charlotte Enterprise Communities, Johnston YMCA, Freddie Mac, Dress For Success, Mecklenburg County Work Release Center, Mecklenburg County Drug Court, Energy Committed to Offenders, Job Link, BRIDGES, Mecklenburg County Women's Commission, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Urban League, and the Women's Shelter. These agencies provide student referrals, assist with job placement, pay tuition, buy student textbooks, and provide daycare, transportation and follow-up services.

The Pathways to Employment Program is a flexible, twelve-to-sixteen week training program that combines classes that teach basic academic and job readiness skills and provides training for jobs where skilled workers are in high demand. Students attend classes 9a.m. to 5p.m. Monday through Thursday, and one-half day on Friday. While in class, instructors focus on topics in human resources (employability and life skills), basic skills (reading, math, and communication skills), and specific job skills. Areas of study include: Medical Reimbursement Specialist, Hospital Unit Coordinator, Medical Office Administrative Procedures, Heating and Air Conditioning, Office Information Specialist, Customer Service Representative and Data Entry Specialist. A new program in Vinyl Siding Installation is currently under development and will be offered to inmates in the Mecklenburg County Jail North.

The short-term training our Pathways students receive is successful because of the integrated components of the curriculum. Students learn the specific skills they need for the job in the occupational courses. The Career Skills classes help students who need to complete their GED as well as helping all of the adult learners improve their basic skills. In the HRD Employment Readiness class, students learn to write a resume and cover letter, how to dress for an interview, interviewing techniques, how to handle difficult questions, and where to look for a job, as well as participating in career fairs. Potential employers and employment agencies are invited to make presentations to the students in class.

Central Piedmont has a unique partnership with the Department of Social Services. Having a DSS representative on the college campus is crucial to a smooth running program. The social worker completes the initial screening of student applicants, administers testing, completes registrations, and conducts student orientations for each

program. The social worker also provides the Pathways students with bus passes, ensures that the students' childcare is in place, issues vouchers for textbooks and materials, and handles most paperwork on campus. The social worker serves as a liason between the Work First clients and their individual social workers. These services help students stay in class and that in turn improves the program's retention rates.

The partnership with the Department of Social Services has resulted in the funding and establishment of a computer lab on the central campus for Work First participants in the Pathways program. This new computer lab has enabled the Pathways program to expand allowing additional students to be trained in high demand skilled jobs with a bright career future.

The partnership with the United Way of Central Carolinas has resulted in the establishment of a Scholarship Fund. Over the past three years, the United Way has awarded Central Piedmont Community College $98,539 for student scholarships. These scholarships provide books and tuition to those people who would like to enroll in Pathways and are not Work First clients, yet do not have the financial resources to do so.

The partnership with the Charlotte Enterprise Communities has resulted in the development of model programs such as HVAC training for inmates of the Mecklenburg County Work Release Center, and the Vinyl Siding Program at the Mecklenburg County Jail North.

Yet another partnership with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Urban League has resulted in follow-up services to Pathways students who withdraw from the program. CPCC refers students to the Urban League for services in the areas of job search and substance abuse counseling.

CPCC has demonstrated past effectiveness in meeting the work-related self-sufficiency needs of the Pathways participants by providing instructional content of sufficient intensity and duration to make sustainable changes in the self-sufficiency capabilities of Work First clients. This effectiveness has resulted in serving 405 students in 3.5 years. Of this number, 100% were low-income, single parents, with a median age of 28, averaging 2.76 children per client. The majority needed to improve their basic skills. Statistics include a program retention rate of 80%. Over 81% of the graduates were employed six months after graduation and 75% of the participants no longer receive cash benefits. An average wage of $10.50 per hour allows the Pathways graduates to truly become self-sufficient.

While in Charlotte on February 27, President George W. Bush held a press conference to discuss Welfare Reform. At that time, he shook hands with the students in the current Medical Office Administrative Procedures class and congratulated them on making such a positive change in their lives. Referencing the Pathways program, President Bush stated, "The innovation that takes place in this community is positive and strong and that's why we're here, to herald a program that actually works. Sometimes they sound good on paper, they read good, but the results are short, and that's not the case in Mecklenburg County when it comes to putting people to work."

The quality of the short-term training with its integrated curriculum, the on-site social worker, the strong partnerships with community agencies, and the program's retention and job placement rates make the Pathways to Employment program at Central Piedmont Community College a successful solution to workforce development.

Project JumpStart

Another example of short-term training leading to a lifelong career path is the JumpStart Program at Central Piedmont Community College. This program was initiated as a result of demand for skilled workers in the "trades" areas from the Charlotte, NC workforce as well as a method to increase the number of students in low-enrollment programs at the college. Another goal of the program is to encourage student persistence and retention, and ultimately, increase the number of completers in the Associate Degree programs at the college.

Central Piedmont Community College implemented the JumpStart project Fall Semester, 2000. JumpStart started as a pilot program designed to serve underemployed and unemployed adults wishing to make a career change or upgrade skills in their current positions. Many work in minimum wage positions and are eager to enter a professional trade, however their current earnings do not afford them the opportunity to pursue their education. This program may allow them to pursue occupations paying anywhere from $11 per hour to $20 per hour. The model is designed to promote lifelong learning. The ultimate goal for completers is to obtain an entry level position in their chosen field, work for a certain period of time, and return to the college to obtain additional certificates, and ultimately an AAS degree. To date, financial assistance in the form of scholarships has been provided from a benevolent donor which pays tuition, fees and in some cases, books and supplies. However, realizing that these funds will not be available forever, the program areas at the college have been cultivating support from their advisory committees to underwrite the costs of this program.

College credit courses designed to teach the technical skills necessary for high demand occupations are the foundation for the one-semester JumpStart certificates. Existing courses have been packaged to provide basic entry-level training. To meet industry demands for "soft skills" training, the World of Work course is included in each of the four certificate programs. This course addresses topics such as appropriate behavior on the job, work ethics and career advancement. In addition, with assistance from the college's career center, program participants are taught how to search and interview for jobs upon completion of the certificate program. Since its inception, the program has served approximately 200 students in more than a dozen career program areas.

Assessment of the program has focused on the following student outcomes: The rate of program completion; student satisfaction with the program and the College; the number of program completers who return to CPCC for advanced training and/or certificates, and employment outcomes - the number of program completers who obtain gainful employment in the high-wage, high-demand occupations. Overall, the completion rate has averaged from sixty eight to seventy five percent. Many of the participants have realized that in order to obtain the level of employment that they would like to achieve, they need more than one semester of training, and consequently more than one certificate. This is particularly true in high tech areas such as welding and information technology.

It is important to remember that this program started as a pilot. Since its inception, the college has modified the program to be more efficient. For instance, some specialty programs, such as Flexography (a printing process) have been alternately offered so as not to flood the marketplace. One of the greatest advantages of this program has been the increased enrollments in many programs that were once floundering. Instead of being

prescriptive in nature, these programs have modified their offerings to better meet the needs of business, industry and students.

There have been other benefits as well. This program is currently being altered to allow Adult High School Students to enroll in technical certificate courses as electives in their program of student. As a result, an Adult High School student may graduate with not only a high school diploma, but also a community college certificate in one of the technical program areas. Plans are currently underway to create an afternoon High School JumpStart Certificate Program. Under this model, students will participate in Huskins classes as part of their school day and like the Adult High School students, will earn a high school diploma as well as a technical certificate upon graduation from high school.

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